

"The Canary and the Nightingale":

Performance and Virtue in *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*

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Theatrical performances abound in Alcott's novels for children: many of her characters express professional aspirations toward careers in performance, and family theatricals appear in book after book, often employed with a moralistic purpose, to advance the characters' growth in virtue. But "performance," understood broadly as action staged and executed before an audience, can also be morally problematic, and in deep and uneasy tension with virtue, when the artifice of staged action, performed for an external response, is contrasted with genuine, unsimulated virtue, located within the virtuous individual, expressing itself in actions done for virtue's sake alone. In this essay, I propose a reading of Alcott's *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom* as offering Alcott's exploration of this tension, and partial reconciliation of it.

Both of the Rose Campbell novels demonstrate the tension between virtue and performance, which can be better understood through attention to Alcott's knowledge of and responses to Platonic and Aristotelian moral theory. Phebe has Plato's "golden" and divinely dispensed nature that allows her to develop morally with relative ease; she has no need to imitate any others to achieve her moral virtues. Likewise, as both performer and virtuous woman, Phebe sings and acts on behalf of others without attention to external rewards, but for the activity's own sake, as Aristotle's ethic requires. By contrast, Rose begins as a struggling imitator of others' virtue and is constantly tempted by the external rewards of virtuous acts. She must learn to resist "performing virtue" for the sake of unworthy and compromising motivations before her soul grows into the moral perfection that wins Mac's heart.

Performance and Virtue in Tension

Louisa May Alcott lived and wrote in a cultural context in which theater was the object of both aesthetic and moral disdain. In his history of American drama from the colonial period through the first World War, Gary Richardson writes that "Drama has always been the stepchild of American literary culture. Whether out of religious, aesthetic, or ideological bias, the nation's cultural arbiters have traditionally been, at best, ambivalent about America's drama and its functions" (Richardson ix). Ordinary citizens shared this ambivalence. Although Americans of all classes attended the theater in significant numbers, at the middle of the nineteenth century, 70 percent of the American people regarded going to the theater as sinful (Palmer 165), and one clergyman went so far as to call Lincoln's assassination "warning from God about the dangers of the theater" (Johnson 582)

At the same time, theater was also emerging as an engine of moral reform. In the popular theater, the currently dominant form of the melodrama "provided an efficient vehicle for exploring social institutions, movements, and values. . . Replete with virtue, courage, and persistence, melodrama's heroes and heroines are pitted against external forces which threaten to overcome and annihilate their representative humanity" (Richardson 115). John W. Frick concurs that "With its symbolical characterization, its either/or morality, its didactic rhetoric and its resolutions that reward hard work and virtue, the melodrama was the perfect fictional system for making sense of everyday experience" (Frick 6). This found its way into a proliferation of temperance dramas, most famously *The Drunkard* of 1844, "predicated upon the age-old belief that theatre, by presumably holding 'a mirror up to nature,' could serve instructive purposes and hence inculcate a particular complex of values" (Frick 12). Frick quotes Mark Twain as quipping that nine-tenths of the population learned morality in the nation's theatres, not its churches (Frick 12) Thus, even as some moralists decried the sinfulness of the theater, others employed its persuasive and affective power to combat other forms of sinfulness elsewhere in society.

The utopian planners with which the Alcott family associated also endorsed theater as a tool of social reform and moral education. Theater historian Rosemarie K. Bank writes that "Performance formed a regular part of colony life at Brook Farm. Indeed. . . performance was an essential part of Fourier's philosophy of integrated individual-social life, as Brook Farm interpreted it" (34). Bank notes that "the letters and diaries of the transcendentalists indicate fairly regular theater attendance, social interaction with actors, and regular reading of and

reference to plays" (35). Bronson Alcott used theatrical performances as a pedagogical tool (Dahlstrand 119), and young Louisa grew up writing, acting, and directing endless family theatricals (Stern 1996 17-18, 41-42; Delamar 31-32; Saxton 174-75), as do her young characters in novel after novel. As an adult, she was a member of several amateur dramatic societies and made failed attempts to become both a professional actress and playwright (Stern 1943). According to Saxton, the staging of "a number of dramatized moral works, like Mrs. Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . made the theater a legitimate experience for a young Victorian woman" (200), and Louisa "spent as much time as she could absorbing the theater's atmosphere and dreaming of fame" (201). Yet Alcott portrays Meg in *Jo's Boys* as genuinely distressed about her daughter Josie's ambitions to pursue a career as a professional actress -- this despite the fact that Meg's real-life counterpart, Louisa's sister Anna, joined Louisa on the stage in various amateur and benefit theatricals.

Some Alcott scholars see the theatrical presentations in the novels as one of Alcott's tools for inculcating moral values: "In texts such as *Little Women*, *Little Men*, *Jack and Jill*, and *Jo's Boys*, children's performances in parlor theatricals function to consolidate a harmonious domestic life by protecting the family from the unspecified dangers of the outside world, teaching morality outlined in proverbs and charades, and curbing radical individualism within a communal project" (Chapman, "Acting (Theme)" 3-4). But others find them more morally ambiguous, in a way that Alcott herself may not have intended or recognized. Elizabeth Keyser, in *Whispers in the Dark*, gives a darker interpretation of Marmee's instructions to her girls to continue acting out their favorite *Pilgrim's Progress*: "Marmee's words imply . . . that women's pilgrimage is merely a game, an imitation of men's, and that it takes place within the confines of the home for the purpose of winning male approval" (63). Moreover, in their repeated episodes of playing, pretending, and acting, the girls are merely "rehearsing for the games and roles they will, as Marmee says, be playing all their lives" (64). Keyser associates theatricality not with creative and artistic self-expression, but with a script-following conformity: "Significantly, conventional Meg, not passionate Jo or stubborn Amy, is described as the most accomplished actress. . . she is simply ready to play the part in life assigned her" (64), leading the way for all the sisters, "whether reluctantly or enthusiastically, [to] rehearse their lines in a domestic script" (64). Other readers may react differently: as a child reading *Little Women*, I always found Meg's prowess as

the family's leading actress puzzlingly inconsistent with the rest of her character -- the one redeeming characteristic in Meg's domesticated dullness. One might well conclude that "Over her 30-year career representing actors and acting in fiction for children and adult readers, [Alcott] was unable to resolve her ambivalence about the world of the theater" (Chapman, "Acting (Theme)" 4).¹ This tension between virtue and performance, I shall argue, reaches its pinnacle in *Eight Cousins* and *Rose in Bloom*.

Deeper roots for this tension can be found in the Greek ethical thought which so deeply influenced Bronson Alcott's philosophy and pedagogy. Although Bronson Alcott was most drawn to German idealism and Christianity, Aristotle and Plato were central to his philosophical orientation. His classical reading began with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*" (McCuskey 72), and to solve "the problem of the relationship between the soul and external circumstances," he "read and reread . . . Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Ethics*," as well as Locke, Bacon, and Combe (Dahlstrand 90). But his deeper affinities lay with Plato, whom Emerson said he read "as an equal" (Saxton 58). An early biographer, Odell Shepard, writes that "It was in May, 1833, and in Mrs. Eaton's attic in Library Street, Philadelphia, that the Connecticut pedlar [sic] first opened Plato's *Cratylus*, *Phaedo*, *Timaeus*, and *Parmenides*, in the translations by Thomas Taylor. When recording the event many years after, he felt it necessary to write in red ink, as he did elsewhere only in commemorating his marriage, the births of his daughters, the opening of the Civil War, and the assassination of Lincoln" (160). Bronson Alcott observed of himself in his journals that he was a follower of Aristotle in theory, yet a true Platonist in practice (quoted in McCuskey 72), drawn to Plato's idealistic and spiritual metaphysics, intuitionist grasping of eternal Forms, and theory of the soul as growing in wisdom through repeated reincarnations.

Although the two basic beliefs underlying Alcott's teaching, that men are by nature equal and that men are by nature good (McCuskey 22), are absent from Plato and Aristotle, who believed in neither ethical nor political egalitarianism, nor universal, innate human virtue, Aristotle's belief in the possibility of habituating children into virtue, and Plato's faith in the child's ability to uncover intuitive ethical knowledge both played a role in Bronson Alcott's pedagogy, which subsequently found its way into many of Alcott's novels: "[Alcott's] domestic fictions reflect the views of both her parents. Bronson Alcott believed that young children have an innate moral sense that

can be led astray by society's artificial institutions or by the child's own weakness or wildness. The task of a parent or teacher, therefore, is to cultivate children's moral instincts, shelter them from corrupting society, help them see that they desire the good, and teach them the self-control necessary to achieve their own higher desires" (Kenschaft 214). Heidi Anne Heiner points out that in *Eight Cousins*, "as in many of her novels, [Alcott] incorporates Bronson Alcott's attitudes about children and education into Uncle Alec's lessons" (94). Likewise, in her commentary on *Eight Cousins*, Ruth MacDonald attributes Uncle Alec's encouragement of "freedom, rest, and care" and play of boys and girls together to the influence of Bronson Alcott's educational theories (51).² Both novels focus heavily on Uncle Alec's carefully constructed design of educational experiences for Rose, from diet and exercise to boating and coeducational play, and his desire to shield her from dangerous dabbling in French novels and exposure to high society's excesses.

While teaching at the Temple School in Boston, where a bust of Plato held a place of honor in his classroom, Bronson Alcott declared the belief that "from a group of twenty well-selected children he could draw forth in their conversation everything that is in Plato (McCuskey 166); "he felt that his long-standing belief in the Platonic theory of 'recollection' had been confirmed. The children had said such wonderful things!" (Shepard 184).³ In his examination of the long-standing friendship between Bronson Alcott and Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hubert H. Hoeltje calls Bronson Alcott a "lover of Plato to whom the Dialogues were a primer of speculation and action and who employed them in his school as many a lesser teacher employed the multiplication table or the alphabet" (27).

Her father's love of Plato must have been shared with his daughters to some extent. Bronson Alcott began the record of observations that he kept on Louisa with the comment, "That was a beautiful idea of Plato's, that mundane experience was but the recollection of the divine" (Saxton 76). Madeleine Stern intimates that Bronson Alcott taught Greek philosophy to Louisa and the neighbor children (Stern 1996 44), and Louisa May Alcott quotes from Plato in one of her letters (to Maggie Lukens, on February 14, 1884, seven years after the publication of *Rose in Bloom*), in which she presents a view of the soul very similar to the one Plato defends in the *Meno*. Holding that "immortality is the passing of a soul thro many lives or experiences," she goes on to say, "I seem to remember former states before this, & feel that in them I have learned some of the lessons that have never been mine here, & in

my next step I hope to leave behind some of the trials that I have struggled to bear here & begin to find lightened as I go on. This accounts for the genius & the great virtue some show here. . . . Some are born sad, some bad, some feeble. . . Others come as Shakespere (sic), Milton Emerson &c. bringing thier (sic) lovely reward with them & pass on leaving us the better for thier (sic) lives" (279) She then quotes from Plato: "The soul cannot imagine what does not exist because it is the shadow of God who knows & creates all things" (280). One of Louisa's affectionate nicknames for her father was "dear old Plato" (Delamar 119).

Although a detailed look at Platonic and Aristotelian ethical thought is beyond the scope of this paper, certain themes are especially relevant for our purposes. Plato, through the mouthpiece of Socrates, rejects the view that justice is defined through the performance of specified just acts, such as avoiding deceit and paying what one owes (the account of justice put forward by aged Cephalus in Book I of the *Republic*); justice is a matter not of outward deeds, but of the inner state of one's soul (Annas 34, 167). Justice, and virtue generally, is a function not of what we do, but of who we are. The chief function of the Platonic state is to identify the inborn nature of each young citizen -- as having a "bronze or iron" soul fitting one for the working class, or a "silver" soul fitting one for the warrior class, or a "golden" soul fitting one for the guardian class -- and then to educate them to achieve their full potential, chiefly through a carefully crafted program of gymnastics and music.

For Plato, aesthetic sensibility is the central element of moral education; the soul of the young person is shaped by his encounter with the right kind of music and poetry. In this process of aesthetic education, Plato sharply excluded any theatrical "imitation" in favor of poetic forms involving straight narrative, with no inserted dialogue. Plato rails against the theater in his blueprint for an ideal society, banning dramatists from membership in his *kallipolis*, or "beautiful city." The individual will "hardly be able to pursue any worthwhile way of life while at the same time imitating many things and being an imitator (*Republic* 395a); *if* individuals are to engage in imitation, "they must imitate from childhood what is appropriate for them, namely, people who are courageous, self-controlled, pious and free, and their actions" (395c). Plato concludes, "It seems then, that if a man, who through clever training can become anything and imitate anything, should arrive in our city, wanting to give a performance of his poems, we should bow down before him as someone holy, wonderful, and pleasing, but we should tell him that there is no one

like him in our city, and that it isn't lawful for there to be" (398a).⁴

Striking echoes of Plato's refusal to equate true virtue with the mere outward performance of virtuous deeds and his insistent disdain for imitation are found in Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" (first published in 1841), which Mac shares with Rose in *Rose in Bloom*. Emerson complains that "Men do what is called a good action, as some piece of courage or charity, much as they would pay a fine in expiation of daily non-appearance on parade" (31). The truly virtuous man, in contrast, locates his virtue within himself: "My life is for itself and not for a spectacle" (31); "I know that for myself it makes no difference whether I do or forbear those actions which are reckoned excellent" (31). In a passage which recalls Plato's sun imagery from the cave allegory in the *Republic*, Emerson writes that "We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which make us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. When we discern justice, when we discern truth, we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams" (37). Toward the end of the essay, he exhorts, "Insist on yourself; never imitate. Your own gift you can present every moment with the cumulative force of a whole life's cultivation; but of the adopted talent of another, you have only an extemporaneous, half possession" (47).

Plato's extensive writings defy simplistic summary, but it is worth mentioning also his account of how virtue is acquired in the *Meno*, as it is so clearly echoed in the letter by Louisa May Alcott quoted above. In that dialogue, which begins with the question of whether virtue comes by practice, teaching, or nature (70a), Socrates shows Meno how an uneducated slave boy can solve a problem in geometry simply by answering Socrates' skilled questions, which elicit from him knowledge apparently acquired in a previous life, since the boy had received no formal education in mathematics in this life: "If he has not acquired [these opinions] in his present life, is it not clear that he had them and had learned them at some other time?" (86a) -- that is, in a previous life. Socrates concludes, regarding virtue, that it comes not from nature, nor from training and teaching, "but comes to those who possess it as a gift from the gods" (99e). Subsequent education, as outlined in the *Republic*, can play a role in helping the golden-souled individual turn toward the illumination of the sun; but one's soul must first be fitted to receive its radiance.

Like Plato, Aristotle holds that outwardly virtuous action is insufficient for true virtue. A truly virtuous act, according to Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, must be done for its own sake: a virtuous act is not judged as such

simply from an assessment of the outward features of the act, but from an assessment of the inner state of the agent who performs it: "But for actions in accord with the virtues to be done temperately or justly it does not suffice that they themselves have the right qualities. Rather, the agent must be in the right state when he does them. First he must know [that he is doing virtuous actions]; second, he must decide on them, and decide on them for themselves; and third, he must also do them from a firm and unchanging state" (1105a). The virtuous person takes pleasure in acting virtuously, "For virtue of character is about pleasures and pains" (1104b). For Aristotle, virtue consists in a "mean" between extremes -- understood not mechanically, as some midpoint between two opposing states, but as sensitivity to context and situation informed by *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. It is a matter of having (and expressing) "feelings at the right time, about the right things, toward the right people, for the right end, and in the right way" (1106b). Virtue is not taught through formal instruction, but acquired through "habituation" -- learned through doing. Aristotle uses an apt musical analogy here: "we become harpists by playing the harp. Similarly, then, we become just by doing just actions" (1103a). While Aristotle is clear that virtue and vice do not arise in us naturally, but must be acquired over time, the virtuous person acts easily and effortlessly, without struggle. As J. O. Urmson explains, "character depends rather on what one likes doing, what one enjoys doing, what one wants to do, than merely on what one does. The man of excellent character will act effortlessly in the correct way; he will not have to make himself so act" (27). So, while Aristotle does allow more scope for "imitation" than Plato does, this must be only a starting point in the acquisition of true virtue, which Phebe embodies and toward which Rose must strive.

Eight Cousins

Eight Cousins (1875) opens with lonely, orphaned Rose overhearing Phebe's series of lifelike bird imitations emanating from Aunt Plenty's kitchen, mistaking these for the music of actual birds.⁵ Rose is "astonished" and extremely impressed when she discovers that Phebe herself is able to warble the tunes of a wide variety of birds:

sure enough, out of her slender throat came the swallow's twitter, the robin's whistle, the blue-jay's call, the thrush's song, the wood-dove's coo, and many another familiar note, all ending as before with the musical ecstasy of a bobolink singing and swinging among the meadow grass on a bright June day (5).

Bird imagery is associated with Phebe frequently throughout both books. Anne Phillips sees Phebe's birdsong as linking human community with the natural world (1992); it also highlights the naturalness of Phebe's performance itself. In singing, Phebe is simply expressing her nature -- just as we will later see that in acting virtuously, Phebe is simply expressing her nature. Rose assumes that Phebe must have been taught her birdsong (fresh from a finishing school for young ladies, Rose thinks that all skill in performance must be the result of formal education), and she is still more impressed when Phebe tells her that her only teacher was "the birds" (5). Likewise, for Aristotle, virtue is not taught through formal instruction, but learned through doing, and through modeling oneself after moral exemplars. While Plato might be disdainful of Phebe for imitating bird voices (he does specifically criticize those imitating "the cries of dogs, sheep, and birds"! (*Republic* 397a)), for Phebe such imitation reveals her soul's sensitivity to musical beauty.

Alcott never provides any explanation of how Phebe comes by either her musical talent or her virtuous nature. Despite speculations that Phebe might "turn out to be somebody" (*Rose in Bloom* 38), no distinguished parentage is ever revealed for Phebe; she remains always the girl of unidentified parentage, from the poorhouse. Thus we have to read Phebe's musical and moral virtues as flowing from her own innate nature, her Platonic golden soul; Phebe's poverty ironically protects her unspoiled nature from corruption in any finishing school, such as the maligned and misguided academy that Rose briefly attended, and whose ill effects Uncle Alec must now work to counteract.

Both musical performance and the expression of virtue come with more difficulty to Rose. Unlike birdlike Phebe, who can simply open her mouth and sing, flowerlike Rose must first bud, then gradually, and sometimes painfully, engage in the prolonged process of blooming. During this first musical performance of Phebe's, Rose admits that her talents are far less than those of her soon-to-be-friend: "It is very wonderful!" Rose exclaims to Phebe. "I can sing, but nothing half so fine as that" (5). From the first, Phebe is cast as successful performer, Rose

as merely her appreciative audience. Likewise, on Rose's first meeting with her seven boy cousins, the "Clan" arrives in Scottish costume and entertains her with a spirited Highland fling, while Rose sits applauding, "watching the active lads with breathless interest" and praising them: "It was splendid! I never went to the theatre but once, and the dancing was not half so pretty as this" (16). If Rose is going to become an admired performer like Phebe or her Campbell cousins, she will have to learn to perform in a different way.

But it is not Phebe's musical performance, but her virtue, that first wins Uncle Alec's praise, further intensifying Rose's envy. When Rose reports to Uncle Alec that Phebe, unlike Rose, doesn't view herself as having "any troubles to plague her," Uncle Alec replies, "So she doesn't call desertion, poverty, and hard work, troubles? She's a brave little girl, and I shall be proud to know her." Whereupon, "Uncle Alec gave an approving nod, that made Rose wish she had been the one to earn it" (26). Uncle Alec's theories of child-rearing -- involving healthy diet, vigorous exercise, and sensible dress -- can be read as attempts to lead Rose to the state of health and wholeness that Phebe achieves without any need for theorizing.⁶ Unable to match Phebe's excellence in musical performance, Rose strives to emulate Phebe in virtue, but, as we shall see, she errs in treating virtue as a performance, whereas Phebe does not treat even musical performance as a performance: Rose overhears Phebe singing and warbling simply for her own pleasure as she works, not as a deliberate and rehearsed exhibition for others. Rose's central displays of virtue in *Eight Cousins* consist in what I call her "performing virtue" itself, in certain staged attempts to demonstrate her virtue to Uncle Alec and to her aunts and cousins, treating virtue as something done deliberately in the public eye for the external, explicit appreciation of others.

Eight Cousins contains several episodes in which Rose provides a deliberately staged virtuous performance. All of them are in one way or another conspicuous failures. The most dramatic is Rose's plot to trade places with Phebe during the family's Fourth of July celebration, so that she will take Phebe's place toiling in the kitchen, while Phebe takes her place camping on the island with the boys. While Rose ponders the nature of self-sacrifice as something that is done "because one loves another person very much and wants her to be happy. . . and doing it pleasantly, and being glad about it, and not minding the praise if it doesn't come" (107), it is clear that Rose burns first and foremost to win the praise of Aunt Jessie and Uncle Alec, and even more so of her sometimes dismissive

cousins. When she overhears Archie refer to her as "rather a nice little thing," she vows, "They will treat me with more respect after to-morrow [the day of her planned sacrifice], I guess" (110). But honor from others, Aristotle argues, is "too superficial to be what we are seeking; for it seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored, whereas we intuitively believe that the good is something of our own, and hard to take from us" (1069a). Aristotle refuses to equate true happiness or virtue with the respect Rose is seeking.

Rose carries out her sacrifice, which makes Phebe much more embarrassed and uncomfortable than grateful and happy; Phebe has only recently been "adopted" by Rose and still "knows her place" in the class structure of nineteenth-century American society. She also knows that the boys will resent being deprived of Rose's cherished company. When Rose persists in the sacrifice past the point at which the others expected her to have given it up, Uncle Alec says to Aunt Jessie that he plans to beg Rose's pardon "for thinking it [her sacrifice] might be done for effect." (113). But it seems clear that it *was* largely done for effect, to prove to others her exemplary virtuousness. Certainly the sacrifice was not thought through in a careful and sensitive way, informed by Aristotelian practical wisdom, for it did not have its intended effect of brightening Phebe's life by releasing her from drudgery, as, throughout her forced stay on the island, Phebe wishes she could go back home again, "meditating an elopement with one of the boats if she could get a chance" (113). Meanwhile, Rose, back at home, whispers to herself, "I hope some one wishes I was there!" (114). Rose says, "I truly don't want any reward but Phebe's pleasure," but Phebe does not receive pleasure from the adventure, and while "the elders loved her the better for it. . . the boys were not inspired with the sudden respect which she had hoped for. In fact, her feelings were very much hurt by overhearing Archie say that he couldn't see any sense in it; and the Prince [Rose's cousin Charlie] added another blow by pronouncing her 'the queerest chicken ever seen'" (117). And indeed, it does seem as if there wasn't much "sense" in the sacrifice, as it turns out.

Alcott's narrative voice treats Rose's disappointed reaction here as only natural, "for, though we do not want trumpets blown, we do like to have our little virtues appreciated, and cannot help feeling disappointed if they are not" (117). But Rose *did* want trumpets blown, despite all disclaimers to the contrary, whereas Phebe, Rose's rival in performance and virtue, had never sought to have her "little virtues appreciated." Moreover, Alcott immediately

offers a clearly contrasting chance for Rose "quite unconsciously" to win "not only the respect of her cousins, but their gratitude and affection likewise" (117). This is when she helps to nurse Mac after a sunstroke leaves him in danger of permanent blindness: Rose is the one who spends "hour after hour" reading to Mac, and "when the tired head ached worst, she could always soothe him to sleep, crooning the old songs her father used to love" (119). For once Rose, like Phebe, is able to offer a successful vocal performance, but it is a lullaby, that is, music for someone to fall asleep to, rather than music for someone to listen to attentively. Rose achieves her first success as a musical performer only when she drops her efforts to achieve success as a virtuous performer, caring for her cousin only out of her "womanly power of self-devotion" (119). Never one for explicit words of praise, Mac shows his appreciation only by saying, "You are a good little soul, Rosy. Give us 'The Birks'; that is a drowsy one that always sends me off" (126). Rose, "quite contented with this small return for all her sympathy," complies with the request and sends "the laddie. . . off to the land of Nod in about ten minutes" (127). She who only recently spurned the patronizing label of "rather a nice little thing" now settles for the not appreciably less patronizing label of "a good little soul." It is virtue itself, not its external recognition, which is becoming most important.

Rose has not yet abandoned the performance of virtue, however; its temptations remain strong, and each time Rose indulges in them, she receives a fitting punishment. Toward the close of a healthful stay in the country, Rose plans to "astonish uncle" by dramatically demonstrating how she has overcome her old fear of horses: "I'll dash up in grand style, and show him that I am not a coward, after all" (150). Rather than simply expressing her courage unselfconsciously, Rose feels the need to put her new-won virtue on conspicuous and dramatic display, and takes a nasty fall as a result. Mac sees her true and unworthy motivation, chiding her teasingly that "Pride goeth before a fall" (151): too deliberate a display of the virtue of courage becomes instead an instance of the vice of pride. Rose thinks to herself, "Pride does go before a fall, but I wonder if a sprained ankle always comes after it" (151), thereby endorsing Mac's unflattering description of her motivation-- and indeed, Rose's ankle does prove to be sprained.

Rose has better luck in the evening's staging of charades, playing a "sweet angel" in one, and acting out "The early bird catches the worm" in another, "dying to distinguish herself in some way before Uncle Alec" (157). Here she does meet with greater success for her efforts, for theatrical performance itself is not problematized by

Alcott in the same way as the performance of virtue, and Rose's performance here has the added benefit of being used to illustrate a maxim of virtue. Still, all she earns for her efforts is Uncle Alec's cursory compliment, "Very clever; what's next?" (158). Rose is still surpassed by Phebe. To earn Uncle Alec's more extensive praise, Rose must not merely stage a maxim of virtue, but live it.

Rose's next attempt at performance directed toward the end of moral education is even less successful, when she entertains her assembled cousins with a pointed "little story with a moral to it," directed at the theft of a rolled bandage committed by cousin Jamie's little friend, Pokey, who bursts into tears upon having her guilt revealed through Rose's very thinly veiled parable. Here Uncle Alec chides Rose for the cruelty of her storytelling: "Come, Rose, it's too bad to tell her little tricks before every one, and preach at her in that way; you wouldn't like it yourself" (174). And Jamie takes swift revenge on Rose by betraying her secretly pierced ears: "*I* know something bad that *you* did, and I'm going to tell right out" (175): Rose's indulgence of her besetting sin of vanity. The mere public preaching of virtue, unaccompanied by any meaningful example of it, is doomed to disappointment; indeed, the Sophists' arrogant hypocrisy in professing to be able to make others virtuous through their rhetoric was a favorite target of Socratic derision. Rose finally earns Uncle Alec's genuine praise when she tries to be a moral influence on others not by preaching, but by example: most notably when she gives up the same ear rings in exchange for Archie and Charlie's promise to give up smoking. Now Uncle Alec's commendation expresses itself in poetic hyperbole: "when I see those rings where they are [on her cousins' watch-guards], my girl is prettier in my sight than if the biggest diamonds that ever twinkled shone in her ears" (202). Apparently Uncle Alec endorses Plato's declaration that the beautiful must be measured by the standard of the good (*Republic* 457b).

Halfway through *Eight Cousins*, Rose's lack of any artistic talents on a par with Phebe's is again brought forward, when she tells Uncle Alec that even though she is a rich girl, she would like to learn "a trade, or something to make a living out of" (179). But she isn't sure what her trade should be: "I haven't any talent, or any especial taste that I can see, and that is why I can't decide, uncle" (179). Uncle Alec suggests a trade that Rose finds considerably disappointing: housekeeping -- that is to say, the trade that takes place only in the private, and never in the public, sphere; one practiced backstage, behind the scenes, rather than in the spotlight; the trade most invisible,

unappreciated, and farthest removed from open appreciation and applause. Uncle Alec identifies the trade of housekeeping as especially virtuous, however, thereby implicitly contrasting virtue with performance, by speaking of the "solid, homely virtues" of Aunt Plenty, who is to be Rose's teacher in her reluctantly chosen trade: "She is not elegant, but genuinely good, and so beloved and respected that there will be universal mourning for her when her place is empty" (181). Rose replies, "I should like to have people feel so about me. Can she teach me to do what she does, and to grow as good?" (181). Note that Rose still focuses first on how she will be viewed by others if she adopts Aunt Plenty's virtues -- how others will react as the audience for her virtues. And the "crowning glory" of Rose's housekeeping lessons, a "handsome, wholesome loaf" of bread "entirely made by [herself]," is presented to Uncle Alec on a "silver salver" in a ceremonial moment; Uncle Alec teasingly offers to "put it under a glass cover and keep it in the parlor as they do wax flowers and fine works of that sort" (185). Rose, to her credit, refuses. She is beginning to realize that the fruit of virtue is not to be displayed, but to be eaten -- though after first being presented for compliments upon a silver platter.

By contrast to Rose, Phebe not only acts virtuously without any explicit desire to impress anyone, or to earn any accolades, or to better her position within the Campbell household, but she also shares her musical talents in the same unselfconscious way. As the book opens with Phebe's warbling in the kitchen, overheard only accidentally by Rose, it closes with her coming in "with fresh water for the flowers," busy in her domestic labors, beginning "to twitter, chirp, and coo, as if all the birds of the air had come to join in the spring revel of the eight cousins" (292). Music is for Phebe a mere accompaniment to her other work, or even more so, an expression of her virtue, as for Plato the harmonies of music are identified with harmonies in the soul. For when she is released from her kitchen drudgery to have only light duties as Rose's maid, she expresses the virtue of gratitude chiefly through song: "Her heart was so full of content that it overflowed in music, and the sweet voice singing all about the house gave thanks so blithely that no other words were needed" (264-5). For Phebe, performance and virtue work together in complete harmony.

Rose in Bloom

The sequel, *Rose in Bloom* (1876), commences several years later, with Rose and Phebe returning home after several years abroad, years spent by Phebe in "studying music in the best schools," training "her lovely voice with happy industry," while Rose and Uncle Alec "roamed about in the most delightful way" (48), visiting model charities to serve as a template for Rose in her chosen profession of philanthropy -- that is to say, the public exercise of virtue, virtue not as a mere expression of personal character, but as a professional occupation.⁷ The stakes are higher in the second book for both performance and virtue, for the girls will be pursuing their chosen professions, while also finding their mates -- and in Phebe's case, earning the right to the love of someone far her financial and social superior, Archie Campbell. While Phebe seeks to earn her welcome into the aristocratic Campbell family through her vocal gifts, she succeeds in doing so only when she risks her life to nurse Uncle Alec back to health after his life-threatening bout with "malignant fever." Likewise, Rose, now past the displays of performed virtue that marked *Eight Cousins*, wins the love of her cousin Mac when she "unconsciously" reveals her "beautiful soul" to him; only then does she finally "bloom" (303). Thus, virtue triumphs over performance here for both young women.

As the girls are greeted by the Campbell family in the first chapter, Rose prepares her cousins to hear the professional plans that she and Phebe have formed while abroad. When Charlie protests that a pretty girl's plans need only focus on flirtation and subsequent marriage, Rose retorts that marriage and family are "a very precious and lovely part" of a woman's life, "but not *all*," and declares that she is "sick of being told" that a woman is only fit to be a "housekeeper and a baby-tender" (11) -- thereby implicitly disparaging the "trade" she had trained for under Aunt Plenty's tutelage in the previous book. Rose then shocks Charlie and his mother, shallow, fashionable Aunt Clara, by declaring her chosen profession to be philanthropy: "Philanthropy is a generous, good, and beautiful profession, and I've chosen it for mine because I have much to give" (13). Archie and Mac "looked well pleased" at Rose's announcement, but Charlie comments cynically, "Very pretty for a little while, and very effective, too; for I don't know anything more captivating than a sweet girl in a meek little bonnet, going on charitable errands and glorifying poor people's houses with a delightful mixture of beauty and benevolence. Fortunately, the dear souls soon tire of it, but it's heavenly while it lasts" (13-14). The implication is that the good deeds here are done only or

principally for effect, with particular attention to the arrangement of the bonnet, as Rose's Fourth of July sacrifice for Phebe in *Eight Cousins* was done principally for effect. It will be Rose's task to prove to Charlie that she is indeed in earnest about her chosen profession.

In the nineteenth century, charitable giving was very much a central activity for Rose's social class. Kathleen McCarthy, in her study of charity and cultural philanthropy in Chicago, *Noblesse Oblige*, writes that wealth had long been viewed as "inextricably linked to public service": "if one succeeded in attaining riches he knew that he must also assume the obligations of stewardship. By virtue of their leisure, breeding, education, and success, the rich were deemed ideally suited to minister to their cities' needs" (3). Benevolent giving was also inextricably linked with gender.⁸ In *Women and the Work of Benevolence*, Lori D. Ginzberg argues that "The nineteenth-century ideology of women's benign, indeed nearly heavenly, influence and the purposes of charity itself. . . were closely connected. The success of charitable and benevolent endeavors depended upon this belief in women's invisibility and lack of self-interest. . ." (216). The requirement of "invisibility" ensures that philanthropy cannot be understood as a primarily public performance. But the figure of the philanthropic woman also "evoked contradictory perceptions" -- gentle and tender, versus strident and strong-minded (Elliot 2). By the 1860s, observes Dorice Williams Elliot, in her fascinating study *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England*, "the noble philanthropic woman" had become a stock character in popular (often religious and didactic) fiction -- characterized by "ambitious desires that were at least as strong as her erotic ones" (161), although the novels often had the traditional romantic ending of the heroine's marriage, perhaps to a partner in philanthropy (as no less a benevolent "angel" as Florence Nightingale herself had recommended) (quoted in Elliot 187).

By calling philanthropy her intended profession, Rose apparently means to distinguish her proposed philanthropic projects from the charitable endeavors commonly engaged in by many of her gender and social class. But she clearly does not mean to call philanthropy her profession in the sense of a paid occupation.⁹ Wealthy Rose does not need, and certainly would not accept, paid compensation for her professional activities (nor do we ever hear of Uncle Alec or Mac accepting payment for their medical services). Philanthropy is Rose's profession in that she devotes herself to serious, semi-scientific study regarding it and that it is meant to occupy in her life the place

occupied in Phebe's by her singing.

The two girls both perform as vocal musicians for the Campbell family that evening, as an inadvertent showcase of their feminine charms -- reinforcing the association between musical talent and the "feminine sphere" of the period (Reardon 76). Rose performs first, offering the apologetic disclaimer, "after you have heard the nightingale, you won't care for the canary" (19). The tune she performs, "in a pleasant, but by no means finished, manner . . . chanced to be 'The Birks of Aberfeldie,' and vividly recalled the time when Mac was ill, and she took care of him" (20). The "chance" choice of this particular song both links performance with virtue for Rose and foreshadows her eventual mating with Mac. The last time we saw her singing this song, in the previous book, it was sung for no other audience than a fretful Mac, with the intended goal of sending him off to much-needed sleep. Now it is sung in public, for a larger audience, and to different effect. Rose focuses on its reception by Mac and Charlie, who will be her two love interests in the story: Mac does not look at Rose as she sings; he sits "just as he used to sit when she soothed his most despondent moods," with his "head down on his arms" (20); his reacting to the song in the old way, even though one might read this as unappreciative of her performance, ironically reassures Rose that Mac -- who will become her ultimately successful suitor and mate -- has no designing plans to do so. Charlie, on the other hand, "fixed his fine eyes upon her with an expression of tender admiration, which made her laugh in spite of all her efforts to seem unconscious of it" (20). Charlie's "attitudinizing" is rejected by Rose as artificial; it is a performed response to her performance.

Phebe's performance, by contrast to Rose's humbler effort, is a virtuoso accomplishment. Alcott comments, "Yes, Phebe was herself now, and showed it in the change that came over her at the first note of music. . . a blooming woman, alive and full of the eloquence her art gave her," pouring "out her song as simply and joyfully as the lark does soaring toward the sun" (21). It is during this first performance, precisely at five and twenty minutes past nine, that Archie falls in love with Phebe. While Rose does not "bloom" until the very last paragraph of the novel, Phebe here is represented as already in full bloom. Her song is linked with the birdsong that introduced her to Rose in the first chapter of *Eight Cousins*; here, as there, Phebe is merely following her birdlike nature. Although formal study has now enriched and deepened the early informal "teaching" of the birds, it has not fundamentally

altered Phebe. She is most herself when she sings, not performing per se, but expressing her true nature. Her singing is a gift that she can give to others, an expression of the Aristotelian virtue of generosity.

The canary and nightingale metaphor that Rose employs is instructive. The canary is the tame, domesticated bird, accustomed to artificiality and constraint; the nightingale lives and sings in the wild. The nightingale is not only more musically accomplished, but more free than the caged canary, suggesting that Rose (and Alcott) views Phebe as more free than Rose, despite her poverty and lack of social position. Certainly, while poverty is a bar toward Phebe's full participation in the social activities of Rose's world ("Phebe! you don't mean to say that you are going to make a lady of *her!*" gasped Annabel (38)), it also saves her from having to devote precious time and energy to these social requirements, as Rose is obliged to do; while poverty and absence of "birth" are initial impediments to Phebe's union with Archie, they also allow Phebe to know that she is loved by Archie for herself and not for her external and extraneous advantages (64). Phebe is in this way more free than Rose is to follow her heart.

Rose embarks on philanthropy under the guidance of Uncle Alec, who finds it a "little difficult to restrain the ardor of this young philanthropist, who wanted to begin at once to endow hospitals, build homes, adopt children, and befriend all mankind" (49). The first of her actual philanthropic projects that the reader hears about is repairing and altering two old houses in the city to be made into "comfortable homes for poor but respectable women to live in" (84) -- not rent free, because "uncle showed me that it was wiser not to make genteel paupers out of them, but let them pay a small rent and feel independent," with Rose of course not profiting from their rent, but using it for "helping other women in like case" (84). Uncle Alec's advice is of its time, when philanthropic women were expected to "learn not only to discipline their desires and submit to supervision but also to perform their charitable acts in the right way" (Elliot 176); "Many reformers, political economists, philanthropists, and even novelists had already complained about ineffective, even harmful philanthropic efforts . . . likely to do more good than harm by 'pauperizing' the poor" (Elliot 177).¹⁰ Here we also see the importance of Aristotle's doctrine of the mean: the truly generous person is not the one who gives the most, but who gives in the wisest way. Aristotle cautions against enriching people "who ought to be poor" and encourages giving "to people with sound character" (1121b); he would clearly oppose indiscriminate giving that undermines the moral character of the recipients. Charlie warns Rose not to

expect any gratitude for her plans, and indeed Rose is to discover that she doesn't receive any, but at this point in her moral development the explicit responses of others have ceased to be the point of her virtuous undertakings -- though she will be still be wounded when her virtuous efforts are not received by others as she had hoped.

It is worth remarking that dilettante Charlie, who is pursuing no profession at all, is most drawn to the profession of acting, or at least professes to be drawn to it for the purposes of silencing family criticism of his lack of ambition. When he tells Rose, "I seriously think of adopting the stage as my profession," Rose is "alarmed" (44). Although she covers her alarm by telling Charlie condescendingly that "with genius one can do any thing: without it one had better let the stage alone" (44), it is clear that theatrical performance is not a socially acceptable career option for the Campbell clan. Whenever Charlie mentions it, "Uncle Mac turns pale, the aunts hold up their hands in holy horror, and a general panic ensues. Then I magnanimously promise not to disgrace the family" (44).

Despite Rose's declaration of philanthropy as her profession, her philanthropic efforts remain modest throughout the book, as contrasted, for example, with those of Mrs. Gardener, who accosts Rose while she is out shopping to solicit donations for the hundred girls "thrown out of work" when "the great box factory" burned down (182); Rose gives so generously to Mrs. Gardener's request that Kitty calls her "You extravagant thing!" (183), but Rose is not taking any leadership role in the campaign to assist the unemployed girls, merely assisting efforts initiated by others. Rose's "profession" remains at the level of an amateurish avocation. Her "Florence Nightingale" remains a tame, domesticated canary.

Phebe launches upon her profession, as a concert singer, in a benefit concert for a local orphanage -- thus again, harnessing her musical performance to the exercise of virtue. Phebe's "one gift" has been trained to fit her for ultimate financial independence; after a few "small successes. . . won in local drawing-rooms, she began to feel that she might venture on a larger field, and begin her career as a concert singer; for she aimed no higher" (113). "Higher" would presumably be as an opera singer, or another "Jenny Lind," to whom Rose compares Phebe a few pages later (130), a noteworthy allusion to the "Swedish nightingale," the most famous singer of the century, parallel to Phebe in also (largely) abandoning her career after marriage (P. T. Barnum's biographer M. R. Werner dismissed Jenny Lind's greatness as a singer, charging that she "failed to become a great artist because she succeeded so well in

becoming a *Hausfrau*" (quoted in Shultz 316). Alcott presents the modesty of Phebe's aspirations as another expression of her virtue. It is Rose who proposes that Phebe's public debut should be at a benefit concert for "a new asylum for orphan girls"; Phebe welcomes the humble venue, saying, "'Where could I find a fitter time and place to come before the public than here among my little sisters in misfortune? I'll sing for them with all my heart: only I must be one of them, and have no flourish made about me'" (114). And she proceeds to insist on dressing as much as possible like the other orphans and refusing a celebratory dinner afterward in favor of a "Christmas dinner for the poor children" (114). No performer ever offered her gifts to the public in a more virtuously self-effacing manner than Phebe.

At this point in the novel Archie is now deeply in love with Phebe -- but attracted as much to her quiet womanly ways as to her brilliant singing. A frequent visitor to Rose and Phebe in the evenings, he loves to watch Phebe sew as much as to hear her sing: "Even the swift needle charmed him. . . the plain work she did, and the tidy way she gathered her bits of thread into a tiny bag" (117) -- it is Rose's now-disdained profession of housekeeping that has as much allure for Archie, in his chosen mate, as Phebe's public profession of music. Though it is while Phebe is singing that Archie "gives himself up to unmitigated rapture for half an hour" (118), Alcott goes on to remind the reader that the "kindly atmosphere" in which Phebe sings for the Campbells was "like sunshine to a bird" (yet another bird reference), and that it was while Phebe was singing that a man's heart might be thrilled with "a sense of womanly nobility and sweetness" (118) -- that is to say, womanly virtues.

At the benefit concert, Phebe, struck with stage fright, performs her first number mechanically, but she recovers to astonish her audience with a stunning performance of a difficult Italian piece and then charms them with an encore based on the "old bird-song which first won Rose" -- now with words set to it by Mac, who will shortly distinguish himself as a poet: "art and nature worked a pretty miracle, and the clever imitation, first heard from a kitchen hearth, now became the favorite in a crowded concert room. Phebe was quite herself again..." (124). Her triumph has come full circle, from birdsong to Italian aria and back to birdsong, ending with her leaving the stage with a sleeping baby orphan in her arms. How could Archie not propose? And indeed he does, only to be refused, for Phebe is -- correctly -- certain that she can not yet be fully welcomed into the Campbell family (proud of "being

descendants of Robert Bruce" (135), given her lack of "birth."¹¹

During her post-concert confession to Rose about Archie's refused proposal, Phebe represents what had seemed her virtuous humility in refusing every favor offered her by the Campbell family as instead a misguided expression of pride -- that is, as the very inversion of humility: "I *was* proud . . . I wanted to do every thing myself, and not owe one jot of my success, if I had any, to even the dearest friend I've got. It was bad and foolish of me, and I was punished by that first dreadful failure" (123). As with Rose's tumble off her horse in *Eight Cousins*, pride must be punished, especially pride become a vice parading as a virtue: humility (for Phebe) or courage (for Rose).

Phebe must refuse Archie, hoping that "by and by, when she had won a name, fate might be kinder" (144), vowing, "I'll earn my welcome: then perhaps it will be easier for them to give and me to receive it" (145). But although Phebe does distinguish herself as a concert singer in the unnamed city of L, it is only when she surpasses herself in self-sacrificing virtue that she does earn the welcome she covets. After a year's separation, Archie comes to visit Phebe and asks her if she is ready to come home yet: "You have proved that you can support yourself, make friends, and earn a name, if you choose... What more can you ask, my dearest?" Phebe replies: "I don't quite know, but I am very ambitious. I want to be famous, to do something for you all, to make some sacrifice for Rose, and if I can, to have something to give up for your sake. Let me wait and work longer: I know I haven't earned my welcome yet" (309). Phebe is quite right that the aunts are not yet ready to accept her wholeheartedly as Archie's wife, but the reference to becoming famous seems uncharacteristically immodest for Phebe, an aspiration more appropriate for Rose. Perhaps Phebe is forced into more grandiose aspirations because her virtue itself, unadorned by any worldly fame, has not been sufficient to mark her as a suitable match for Archie, though it has been enough to win her Archie's love.

In the chapter explicitly titled, "How Phebe Earned Her Welcome," Phebe is given her chance to "make some sacrifice for Rose," when she nurses Uncle Alec back to health after his bout with malignant fever. This is clearly the ultimate in unselfish virtue -- risking one's own life to save the life of another. Aristotle's discussion of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* culminates in an analysis of the virtuous person's willingness to sacrifice his life for his others: "It is quite true that, as they say, the excellent person labors for his friends. . . and will die for

them if he must" (1169a). However, Rose offers an interpretation of Phebe's sacrifice that is less flattering, even though Rose clearly doesn't intend her words to be read in this way: "*I think few would have done as she has; and if she does get ill and die it will be our fault partly; because she'd go through fire and water to make us do her justice, and receive her as we ought*" (329). Rose interprets Phebe's sacrifice here as done on purpose to make the Campbell family do her justice and allow her to marry Archie -- an interpretation which, if warranted, would undermine the virtuous character of Phebe's actions here. Even this close to the end of the second book, Rose still cannot resist understanding virtue in terms of performance. If we view Phebe as risking her life only to win a convenient welcome from Rose's aunts, the moral character of her sacrifice is indeed undermined. Urmsen raises this same worry about Aristotelian self-sacrifice: "There is a great difference between a sacrifice for the sake of another, which can be rightly described as fine or noble, and giving up something to another in order to attain the greater good of having achieved something fine and noble" (114). But if we view Phebe as risking her life out of profound gratitude toward Uncle Alec and Rose, and simply because this is the kind of person she is, she sacrifices herself for the right reasons, and so wins the aunts' approval as a welcomed, but not directly intended, side-effect of her virtuous deed.

Despite Rose's emphatic insistence at the start of the novel that a woman's life should include both family and profession, Phebe gives up her profession completely upon agreeing to marry Archie. She will not be both singer and wife, but wife only. Archie exclaims to Rose, "Think what she gives up for me: fame and fortune and the admiration of many a better man. You don't know what a splendid prospect she has of becoming one of the sweet singers who are loved and honored everywhere; and all this she puts away for my sake, content to sing for me alone, with no reward but love" (340-41). Phebe replies: "I am so glad to make a little sacrifice for a great happiness: I never shall regret it or think my music lost, if it makes home cheerful for my mate. Birds sing sweetest in their own nests you know" (341).

While Phebe's decision to choose marriage and family over career is certainly unremarkable for its time, it is strikingly at odds with Rose's spirited defense of the compatibility of career and family at the opening of the novel. Perhaps there are class as well as gender dimensions to Phebe's sacrifice: while performance on the concert stage elevates a founding's social prominence, by allowing her to mix with a more socially elite "set," it still does not

make her their equal, which she now becomes as Archie's wife: remember the Campbell family's horror at Charlie's theatrical ambitions. Here, as Plato expelled dramatists from his ideal city, so might the Campbells exile Phebe, for failing to imitate "what is appropriate" for the Campbell clan: there would be, in Plato's words "no one like [her] in [their] city."¹² But the renunciation of public performance in favor of wifely virtue also brings Phebe's story to its inevitable conclusion. For Phebe virtue must triumph over performance decisively in the end. Perhaps the sacrifice seems less troubling if we consider that what Phebe renounces is only the public, professional, paid performance of her gift.¹³ She will still continue to sing in her own "nest," as we first saw her singing, naturally, effortlessly, with no thought of any applauding audience, in the opening chapter of *Eight Cousins*. She will be secluded, but not silenced.¹⁴

More unsettling, however, is Phebe's own view of her choice as at least a "little," and perhaps as a larger, sacrifice, suggesting that she herself does not view the renunciation of her career in an altogether positive light. In an earlier conversation with Archie, she had expressed the explicit longing "to have something to give up for your sake" (309). The abandonment of her career could be seen as making good on this self-denying aspiration, sacrifice sought for the sake of the sacrifice itself. This has uncomfortable echoes of Rose's Fourth of July sacrifice for Phebe in the first book, where the bare idea of self-sacrifice seems to have attracted Rose strongly. Such a deliberate, intentional sacrifice, as Archie himself memorably observes on that occasion, indeed doesn't have "any sense in it." It owes more to an ascetic Christian moral ideal of self-denial and self-mortification than to anything in Aristotle or Plato, who never denigrate the individual's pursuit of his own happiness, or *eudaimonia*.

Rose seems less likely to abandon her profession upon marrying Mac. After Phebe leaves to seek her fortune as a singer, midway through the novel, Rose terminates her first experimental foray into society, telling Uncle Alec that her plan is to try "to be as unselfish, brave, and good as [Phebe] is" -- going on to note that unlike Phebe, who "has a career marked out for her," she is "nothing but a commonplace sort of girl" (146-47). Rose here implies that philanthropy is not a profession on a par with music. Uncle Alec draws her back to her profession, telling her to come to town with him and see her houses. While we see Rose engage in some private acts of charity -- buying flannel for a poor woman in the fabric store; offering the generous contribution for the unemployed factory

girls (182), and making picture books for sick babies at the hospital (222) -- she doesn't seriously settle down to her "long neglected" profession of philanthropy until after Charlie's fatal accident, and even then, as noted above, she never undertakes it in a thoroughly professional way. When she does return to her philanthropic activities, they are distinctly unrewarding. Rose's "Home for Decayed Gentlewomen," as the boys call it, is inhabited by tenants who constantly report "new complaints, new wants, and general discontent if they were not attended to" (256) -- a quite brave admission by Alcott of the difficulties of the philanthropic project, and perhaps her commentary on philanthropists who insist on gaining the tribute of unceasing gratitude for their self-consciously good works. Rose herself complains to Uncle Alec, "I didn't expect to make any thing out of it, but I did think they would be grateful" (256) -- once again exhibiting her old flaw of expecting a specific response from others for her acts of virtue.

More gratifying is the philanthropic venture of adopting an abused and abandoned child, brought to Rose by Mac, paralleling her mock-adoption of Phebe in the first book. Here Rose and Mac are shown as partners in philanthropy, whereas Charlie had been not Rose's philanthropic partner, but philanthropic project, the object of her failed temperance crusade on his behalf.¹⁵ Dulce's adoption reveals Rose's philanthropy as an extension of her womanly, and maternal, nature (though little Dulcie never feels like a true daughter, but more like a kindly treated ward).¹⁶ Still, in adopting Dulce, Rose seems to show that philanthropy is compatible with a woman's central role as wife and mother. Elliott locates the conflict between "ambitious" and "erotic" desires as central to much popular fiction of the time, where "it seemed impossible to most people for women to devote themselves to a philanthropic career and still perform the duties of a mother and wife. Thus portraying women who were able to fulfill both their ambitious and erotic desires was a knotty problem for the philanthropic heroine novels" (170). Resolution of the conflict is possible when the philanthropic heroine is "allowed to marry and continue her philanthropic vocation, because her philanthropic desires are presented as part of the same desires that lead to marriage and domestic life" (178). This harmony between philanthropic and domestic desires is signaled by Rose's adoption of Dulce.

As Phebe's fame grows as a singer, and Mac distinguishes himself with the publication of his first well-received book of poetry, Rose's contrasting lack of artistic or performing talent finds expression in a heartfelt confession of jealousy to Uncle Alec: "I want to be or do something splendid as well as they. I can't write poetry or

sing like a bird; but I *should* think I might have my share of glory in some way. I thought perhaps I could paint, and I've tried, but I can only copy" (322). Unlike Phebe, who has long outgrown her early imitation of the birds, Rose continues to disappoint Plato and Emerson by imitating others. Neither housekeeping nor philanthropy has been enough for Rose, chiefly because their external rewards have not been enough. But Uncle Alec's reply to Rose's plaintive self-disparagement directs her back to those two discarded pursuits: "you have one of the best and noblest gifts a woman can possess. . . The art of living for others so patiently and sweetly that we enjoy it as we do the sunshine, and are not half grateful enough for the great blessing" (322-23). Rose retorts that she thinks she'd "like a little fun and fame, nevertheless" (323).

Uncle Alec tells her that "the fun and fame do not last; while the memory of a real helper is kept green long after poetry is forgotten and music silent" (323 -- in other words, that good deeds do bring with them a certain sort of quiet fame, which Rose recognizes in the outpouring of love for Uncle Alec toward the end of the novel as he lies dangerously ill: "The lesson came to Rose when she was ready for it, and showed her what a noble profession philanthropy is, made her glad of her choice, and helped fit her for a long life full of the loving labor, and sweet satisfaction unostentatious charity brings to those who ask no reward, and are content if 'only God knows'" (331).

The reference to Rose's future "long life" of philanthropic work suggests that Rose, unlike Phebe, will continue in her profession. The book closes with Rose declaring her love for Mac and the two of them vying with each other to declare the other's gifts the greater. Mac tells Rose, "You shall live the poetry, and I will write it; so my little gift shall celebrate your greater one"; Rose tells Mac, "No: you shall have all the fame, and I'll be content to be known only as the poet's wife" (344). They conclude that they will "work together, and try to make the world better by the music and love we leave behind us when we go" (233) -- that is to say, by both performance and virtue. And now Mac sees that "the last leaf had folded back, the golden heart lay open to the light, and his Rose had bloomed" (344).

Rose's eager scramble to preclude any possible fame for herself may seem disturbing; few female readers today (one hopes!) would be content to be known only as some distinguished man's wife.¹⁷ But given that Rose's moral growth has been marked by her gradually learning to give up temptations to the external rewards of

performance, such as worldly fame, her now-developed ability to discount such rewards for herself marks her own full blooming. Still, why should Mac get to have the fame that Rose so righteously renounces? One answer is that Mac, throughout the novel, has never sought out the external rewards of virtue. He refuses Rose's praise for having graduated first in his class from college: "I began earlier than the other fellows and liked it better: so I don't deserve any praise" (6). Mac resembles Phebe in writing his poetry as the expression of who he is rather than for public acclaim; he hides from Rose his authorship of the first of his poems that we hear about, his lyrics to accompany the bird-song piece that Phebe performs at her first public concert (124). Clearly Mac's poetic talent is meant to be associated here with Phebe's musical talent, both unself-conscious, non-artificial, closely linked to nature. When Mac's first book of poetry appears, it does not borrow from the literary conventions of the time, but is marked by its originality and "spring-like sort of freshness, which plainly betrayed that the author had learned some of Nature's deepest secrets" (124). Significantly, Mac so far rejects imitation that he shaves his beard and trims his hair to avoid even unintentional resemblance to Uncle Alec: "I prefer to look like myself, and not resemble any other man, no matter how good or great he may be" (286). Mac is allowed the rewards of fame by Alcott because, unlike Rose, he never sought them.

Mac falls in love with Rose, on his account, when she shows him her "beautiful soul" during her correspondence with him over Emerson's essays: "the letters showed me what a beautiful soul you had. I loved that first: it was so quick to recognize good things, to use them when they came, and give them out again as unconsciously as a flower does its breath" (303). (Compare Plato's thesis, discussed above, that the justice of the just man lies in the inner state of his soul, not in any specified outward actions.) Two quotes from Emerson's "Self-Reliance" bear on this passage. First, "Men imagine that they communicate their virtue and vice only by overt actions and do not see that virtue or vice emit a breath every moment" (34). This is indeed what Rose has falsely imagined, in her focus on overt actions; she has had to learn to be able to emit virtue "as unconsciously as a flower does its breath"; one might say that she consciously must develop in herself the capacity for unconscious virtue. Emerson goes on to say, with strikingly apt rose imagery: "These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. . . . There is simply the rose; it is

perfect in every moment of its existence" (38-39) -- a hard-won rather than effortless achievement for this particular Rose.

From the first chapter of *Eight Cousins* to the closing chapter of *Rose in Bloom*, Phebe has been able to live a Platonic and Aristotelian life in which performance and virtue are integrated as one. She will renounce the public display of her musical gifts, but she will not give up singing, and public acclaim was never what mattered to Phebe in the first place. Rose has had to struggle to negotiate the relationship in her life between performance and virtue. Learning by the end of *Rose in Bloom* that virtue is its own reward, she can keep performance in her life, but at a safer distance -- as the wife of a poet revered in the public eye. A less conciliatory reading is also available here: that Rose's decision to be less public with her philanthropy is ultimately yet another performative act, designed to secure for her the long-sought approval of Uncle Alec and newly sought approval of his emerging replacement, her husband Mac. Rose clearly relishes the prospect of her husband's literary fame, even if he does not. Moreover, as one of the most famous and revered authors of the day, Alcott herself did not renounce public recognition of her work, even though she satirized some of the tribulations inherent in fame, in her portrait of Jo's "scrapes" in dealing with her adoring fans in *Jo's Boys*. Still, Alcott's Rose Campbell novels can be read as offering a partial, if perhaps uneasy, reconciliation of the tension they uncover and explore between performance and virtue.

Notes

This essay benefitted beyond measure from the extensive and helpful comments of Chris Doyle and the three anonymous reviewers for *Children's Literature* and from the great wisdom and unfailing encouragement of Anne Phillips.

1. For other discussions of theatricality in Alcott, see Fetterley, Haltunen, Hendler, and Chapman (1996).

2. MacDonald reads the "central theme" of *Eight Cousins* as "woman's education" (52), veering toward frequent preachiness, particularly on the subject of female attire. Martha Saxton likewise considers *Eight Cousins* merely "an exercise in discussing girls' education," organized as a "series of lessons rather than as a story," and a "relentlessly preachy" series of lessons, too (Saxton 328-29). For more on Alcott's theories of women's education in *Eight Cousins*, see Mills, "Choosing a Way of Life."

3. When the Temple School closed, and "most of its beautiful decor was sold to pay the debts it had incurred," the Alcotts "managed to save the busts of Plato and Socrates, but little else" (Delamar 12); when the Alcotts moved to Fruitlands, "The busts of Plato and Socrates were placed in the downstairs library" (Delamar 18); as they continued in a nomadic life afterwards, they were "constantly packing up the busts of Plato and Socrates" (Delamar 25).

4. As we shall see below, Phebe's songs are imitative of birds, a category of imitation Plato explicitly disdains, but it is Rose's imitative paintings that Alcott's text singles out for denigration.

5. Phebe, of course, is also orphaned. Claudia Nelson comments on the way in which wealth and class

distinguish one orphan from another: "heiress Rose has her pick of prospective homes. In contrast, . . . Phebe's worthy employers initially overlook her need for an education in *Eight Cousins* (1874) and object to her marrying into the family in *Rose in Bloom* (1876). Between 1860 and 1885, both canonical and noncanonical orphan fiction uses money as a way of distinguishing the adoptable from the unadoptable child" (Nelson 37-38). However, here Nelson overlooks the role that family connections also play in Rose's greater adoptability: it is her various birth aunts who compete with each other to adopt her, as Alcott highlights in the novel's subtitle *The Aunt Hill*.

6. Saxton reads Rose instead as a priggishly perfect character: "As a heroine, Rose has none of the energy that anger and frustration give Jo March. She is a Victorian princess with all the literary defects of an overload of goodness. She is never much more than a tedious object lesson in the deadliness of goodness" (340). By contrast, I read Rose's virtue as unfolding much more gradually and problematically -- and so also much more sympathetically.

7. In the year between the publication of *Eight Cousins* and the writing of *Rose in Bloom*, Alcott spent the winter on holiday in New York; there "she visited the Tombs prison, the Randall's Island orphanage and home for retarded and handicapped children, and the Newsboys Lodging House. Many of Alcott's activities in this intervening period appear, somewhat transformed, in *Rose in Bloom*" (MacDonald 57).

8. MacDonald points out that in *Eight Cousins*, Rose has already taken on "her traditional Victorian role as Lady Bountiful when she decides to adopt Phebe" as her sister (56).

9. It is interesting that Abba Alcott, Louisa's mother, did indeed engage in paid benevolent employment (Delmar 33). Ginzberg points out that if the Alcott girls, like the March girls in *Little Women*, shared their largess with others, benevolence provided their family "with financial support as well." After relocating to Boston in 1848, Mrs. Alcott visited the poor in the employment of various benevolent societies for a salary of \$500 a year: "the only sad feature of my present situation is the necessity I am under of accepting compensation." Ginzberg adds, tartly,

that Mrs. Alcott "soon discovered another sad feature, for she wrote the chair of the society that she could not support her family on \$500 per year and ought to receive \$600" (58).

10. MacDonald identifies this as "Alcott's rather revolutionary (at least for the time) idea about charity, that the deserving poor need, not a handout, but the means to help themselves" (56), but my reading suggests that such a view was in fact quite widespread.

11. MacDonald writes that "the whole business reeks of a class-conscious snobbery that is unexpected, given Alcott's rather progressive views on education and women's rights." Noting that the same snobbery appears in the March family's objections to penniless Nat's wooing of Daisy in *Jo's Boys*, MacDonald speculates: "It is difficult to know whether the issue was simply one of Alcott's blind spots or whether she thought that her readers would not accept Phebe's work-callused hands touching those of the well-born privileged Campbell boys without proving her worthiness" (62). In a striking similarity to Phebe's winning of Archie, Nate also wins Daisy through his musical performance on the violin.

12. I am indebted to one of the reviewers of this essay for suggesting this connection.

13. Gladys Denny Shultz contests Werner's claim that Lind sacrificed her career entirely for her marriage: "The facts are very different. It is true that Jenny was a woman, as well as a greatly gifted artist. She had longed for love and a home, and she felt a completion she had never known before when at last these were given her. But her voice was never stilled until the very last, and she never was a *Hausfrau*, in Werner's meaning of the term" (Shultz 316). After her marriage Lind continued to perform on the concert stage as well as directing her energies toward the education of young music students.

14. Nelson situates the trajectory of Phebe's story within a familiar pattern of nineteenth-century orphan

narratives: "Orphan girls [in these narratives] are more likely to be players in a kind of chutes and ladders game in which they first prove their worthiness and then are exalted, in a single swoop, to riches through their marriage or new family membership, as happens to Phebe in Alcott's *Rose in Bloom*. . . Phebe progresses from maid of all work to paid companion to professional singer to unpaid nurse (and thus surrogate daughter to her patient and benefactor) to wife, after which any further rise will depend on her husband's efforts, not her own" (43).

15. Cf Anne K. Phillips: "Of all the cousins, Mac is the one most likely to understand and appreciate Rose's philanthropic experiments . . . Because of their comfortable rapport and commitment to working together to make their world better, Mac and Rose would appear to have the means to make a happy marriage" ("Mac" 193-94).

16. Nelson comments that Rose "intends the [adoption of Dulce] as charity and expects the placement to be permanent, but since such efforts have been earlier been described as "excellent training for the time when [young women have] darlings of their own" (109-110), and since we are told that her guardian "permitted Rose to keep it for a time at least" (267), we may conclude that the toddler's role is to enhance her patroness's resemblance to "some of Correggio's young Madonnas" (263) and to acculturate her to a future maternity. This informal placement will, one presumes, be brief" (Nelson 183f8). MacDonald concurs that Dulce chiefly provides an opportunity for Rose "to try out her abilities as a baby-tender" and give Mac "ideas about a homey family grouping, including himself, Rose, and Dulce: 'Mac could not help thinking that they looked a little like the Flight into Egypt'" (59).

17. Prathima Anandan responds to the charge that the novel's focus on "imminent marriage all around" may be a disappointing concession to conventionality, by pointing out that Rose not merely gets herself married, but marries the right man: Mac and not Charlie (291). But readers are likely to be disappointed not that Rose and Phebe marry, but that their marriages so clearly eclipse, or in Phebe's case completely eliminate, their nascent careers.

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